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A Critical Study of Relevance Theory and Its Application in
Translation--- On the Translation of *Teahouse*

关联理论及其在翻译中的应用 — 兼谈《茶馆》的翻译

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ABSTRACT

The relevance theory put forth by Sperber & Wilson reconciled the traditional code mode and inferential mode, avoiding the inadequacy of both. The central claim of relevance theory is that interpretation of communication will yield adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost. This fact is believed to be part of our human psychology. As one form of communication, translation is primarily an ostensive inferential cognitive process. The ultimate goal for translation is its optimal relevance to the source text, as is assumed by Gutt. In order to achieve the aim of transferring information to foreign readers, the original writer, through the agency of the translator, forms a communicative relationship with the readers of the translated version. Naturally, three communicative relationships between the writer and the reader, the translator and the writer, the translator and the reader are formed, in which the translator plays the central role. According to the relevance theory, understanding correctly the natural language depends on inferring and finding the relevance.

To illustrate the guiding value of relevance-theoretic approach to translation, the translations of Lao She's *Teahouse* are chosen for case study. By analyzing various strategies different translators adopt to handle language-specific, situational phrases or cultural-loaded expressions in their translations, the author draws the conclusion: various translation strategies can be justified in their own right and it is the translator's accurate assessment of the target reader's cognitive environment that more often than not decides the specific translation strategies and means of achieving optimal relevance. The ultimate evaluation for a translation is whether it effectively conveys the original intention and whether it yields optimal relevance in the target reader's cognitive environment, while the means of achieving optimal relevance do not have to be invariable.

The paper consists of three parts. Chapter One is literature review on relevance theory. Chapter Two covers the application of relevance theory to translation. In Chapter Three, by analyzing the two English versions of *Teahouse*, the relevance theory's enlightenment on translation is given. This paper aims at arousing translators' awareness of applying relevance-theoretic approach to translating literary works.

Meanwhile the author hopes the discussion and methods herewith in this paper can shed light on translators in their prospective field work.

Key Words: relevance theory; *Teahouse*; translation

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摘要

关联理论起源于交际论，它折衷了交际代码说和交际推理说，属于认知范畴。其核心概念最佳关联性被认为是人们自觉遵守的交际原则。E·格特率先将关联理论应用于翻译研究中，指出翻译是一种言语交际行为，作为交际的翻译，在源语的理解和翻译过程中人们对语码的选择所依赖的是关联性。根据认知语境正确认知和理解自然语言是翻译的前提，这一过程中，源语作者和译者，译者和读者之间形成了三者参加的两轮交际关系。根据此理论，译者要让读者以最小的努力来获取最佳语境效果。

以上述研究成果为基础，本文分别从语言、上下文和文化三个方面对老舍先生作品《茶馆》的两个英译本进行分析，着重分析不同译者在处理特殊语言或文化现象时所采用的不同策略，研究关联理论对翻译实践的指导性。通过对两部作品不同英译本的比较，本文作者认为，翻译策略的选择主要取决于译者对译文读者的认知语境的正确评估，翻译方法及策略应不拘一格，只要能在当时的交际语境中有效地传达原文意图，能够在译文读者的认知语境中产生最大关联，任何方法都是可行的。

全文共分三部分。第一章是理论综述，阐述了关联理论的各个方面。第二章是关联理论在翻译中的应用。第三章通过对茶馆两英译本的对比分析，阐述了关联理论对翻译的启示。本文意在提升译者在翻译文学作品过程中运用关联理论的意识。在翻译过程当中，译者既要考虑原文作者的交际意图，也要考虑目的语读者的认知语境。并且灵活采取翻译策略，从而使译者与原文作者，译者和目的语读者达到最佳关联。本文作者希望文中进行的论述和提出的方法能对译者的翻译实践有所启发和帮助。

关键词:关联理论; 《茶馆》; 翻译

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Introduction

In the field of translation studies, debating issues including translatability, rewriting, disputes over literal translation vs. free translation and domestication vs. foreignization have never ceased. At this time, relevance theory came into being and set up new principles for the construction of translation theory and new criteria for translation criticism.

Relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson is a new psychological method to pragmatics. It approaches communication from the cognitive point of view and attempts to answer not only philosophical questions about the nature of communication, but also questions about how the interpretation process unfolds in the audience's mind. According to relevance theory, communication is an ostensive-inferential process. The process of understanding an utterance is the process of inference and searching for relevance between the utterance and its context. Translation phenomena can be accounted for in the relevance theoretic framework (Gutt, 2004:199). Relevance theory supplies a unified theoretic framework to translation studies (Zhao Yanchun, 1999:293).

Although a great number of studies have been undertaken with relevance-theoretic approach to translation, the emphasis is mainly laid on the establishment of its theoretic framework. This paper aims to apply relevance theory in translation practice and to expound its guiding value in translators' comprehension and decision-making process of translation.

Aiming to apply relevance theory in translation practice, the author of this paper chooses the translations of *Teahouse* --- masterpiece of Lao She for case study. By comparing various translation strategies employed by different translators to handle specific linguistic, situational and cultural problems, the author attempts to find out how relevance theory can guide translators in their choice of translation strategy.

The paper is composed of three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the introduction to basic notions of relevance theory. As the most influential theory on communication, some notions of relevance theory, for instance, cognitive environment, contextual effect, relevance, etc., are closely related and truly beneficial to the study of

translation

In Chapter Two, the author explains how relevance theory is applied to translation and how concepts such as cognitive environment, contextual effect and relevance affect translation. The nature of translation is illustrated in the framework of relevance theory and the guidance of relevance theory is explicated in terms of relevance and context.

Chapter Three examines linguistic, situational and cultural features of *Teahouse*. By comparing various strategies adopted by different translators, the author tries to explicate how relevance theory can apply to deal with specific linguistic expressions.

Then the author summarizes the main ideas to illustrate the guiding value of relevance theory to translation practice. By this means, she hopes to lead toward a more engagement with the study of applying relevance theory to translation practice.

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